

# What the Bible Says – and Doesn't Say – About the Church

## Rivne Lecture #4

Introduction: Nothing is more basic to our Christian experience than the church, yet perhaps nothing else is quite so often misunderstood. My goal in this lecture is not to provide a survey of what “church” has come to mean in today’s world. Rather, it is to offer some insights about what the Bible says about the church.

### 1. Perhaps the best way to approach the subject of the church is to explain first of all what the Bible does NOT say about it.

- A. For example, the Bible never discusses “church” as a *building*. In fact, until well into the Third Century A.D., there is no evidence such a thing as buildings designated exclusively as places of worship. Instead, early Christians worshiped in their homes, in public places, and in rented facilities. The New Testament gives examples of all of these, but the most common meeting place seems to have been the homes of believers.
- B. Likewise, the Bible never uses the word “church” to designate an *institution* composed of a pyramid-shaped hierarchy of religious authorities. To the writers of the New Testament, Christ is the only “Head” of the church. There is mention of “bishops” and “deacons,” but these are leaders of local churches, not religious authorities over multiple congregations. Such hierarchical structures as we are familiar with today did not come about until after the time of the apostles and of the writing of the New Testament.
- C. Also, the Bible does not use the word “church” to speak of a particular *sect or denomination*, since these were later developments after the time of Christ and the apostles. In the beginning there was only “the church,” what Paul describes as the “one body” of believers. While they may have had some variance in their beliefs and behavior, they were still all simply “the church.”
- D. The Bible generally uses the word “church” in two senses:
  - (1) First, to designate *a group of believers in a particular place*, especially a city or town, as when the apostle Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica or Corinth or Rome.
  - (2) Second, and less frequently, to speak of *believers everywhere*, what is sometimes called the “universal” church. This is more what Jesus had in mind when He said, “Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

### 2. So what is it that distinguishes the church from all other groups of people?

- A. Simply put, “the church” is the Bible’s way of describing those who have decided to follow Jesus by putting their trust in the power of His death and resurrection, and who have indicated that trust by being baptized in His name and who as a result have the Holy Spirit living within them.
- B. To see this, perhaps it is best to read about the very beginning of the church, which is recorded in Acts 2. The scene is in Jerusalem on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost, some 50 days after the Passover Feast, during which Jesus had been crucified.
- C. The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) record that, following His crucifixion, Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. Acts chapter 1 says Jesus appeared to His disciples over a period of

40 days and gave them instructions to wait in Jerusalem for power from heaven.

D. This sets the stage for what we read in Acts 2:1-47. (READ). Notice these facts about the church that emerge from this reading:

- (1) The Spirit was “poured out” (or, made available) to all on that day, but not everyone automatically received it.
- (2) Using texts from the Old Testament to support his claims, Peter’s speech focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus, which he says pointed to Jesus’ identity as “both Lord and Christ,” who had been crucified at the insistence of some of the very people listening to Peter speak. This story of the Son of God, crucified and raised, is later called “the gospel,” or “good news.”
- (3) Those who were convicted by Peter’s words asked what they should do, and Peter told them: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Acts 2 says that “about 3000” did so that day, and many more afterward.
- (4) Notice what this command says about those who were baptized: They believed Peter’s message about Jesus. They repented of their sins – that is, they were both sorry for them and became determined to change their ways. Most of all, they repented of having rejected Jesus prior to His death. They were “baptized” (immersed in water) in Jesus’ name in order to be identified with Him. When they were baptized their sins were forgiven and the Holy Spirit came to live within them. They immediately formed a community of believers who met for worship, teaching, and fellowship with one another.

E. What does this tell us about the meaning of “the church”?

- (1) It came into existence through the preaching of Christ crucified and risen.
- (2) It consists of people who believe, repent, and have been baptized in Jesus’ name and have had their sins forgiven.
- (3) Its members have God’s Spirit living within them.
- (4) The believers meet for worship, study, and fellowship with one another.

F. So this is what “the church” is, according to the Bible: people in a given location who are bound together by their common faith in Christ and by their acceptance of Him as their Lord and Christ and who have therefore been forgiven of their sins, and who devote themselves to worship and acts of service.

### **3. Why did the church ever becoming anything else? Why do we now speak of denominations and officials and hierarchy and buildings, rather than simply of groups of believers?**

- A. Without going into the details of history, suffice it to say that after the time of the apostles, some Christians began to abandon the practice of simply having local churches with their own appointed leaders who were subject only to Christ and not to human authorities.
- B. For the most part, this was done in order to preserve the church’s unity and the purity of its doctrines, but it had the opposite effect. Rather than preserving unity, churches became divided over how to organize themselves and over what to believe. As a result, there is massive confusion today about these matters.

- C. But it doesn't have to be that way. It is still possible to have local churches which place their faith in Christ, in which all of the members have been immersed into Christ, who meet together for Bible study and worship and to do good to others, and who are not subject to any higher religious authorities.
- D. Such churches exist all over the world. Although there is no centralized organization to calculate their numbers, one knowledgeable estimate says there are such churches in all but seven countries of the world. But let me tell you about one in particular that I am familiar with here in Ukraine.
- (1) In 1993 I was fortunate to be one of a group of 20 Americans who came to Zhitomir in hopes of organizing such a church. We gave Bibles to people and invited them to a series of meetings which were held in the local Philharmonia.
  - (2) At those meetings we preached the same gospel that Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, and urged people to do just as Peter said, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." More than 20 did so, and that was the beginning of the Zhitomir Church of Christ.
  - (3) Rather than leave someone to administer that new church, we showed them what the Bible says about being the church, about worshiping by meeting each Sunday to sing, pray, eat the Lord's Supper (also called communion), teach the Scriptures, and give of their financial means to help one another and others.
  - (4) At first they met in their homes, sometimes in a park, and later in rented meeting places. But they continued meeting together and continued to study and follow the Bible's teachings. Over the years, we have visited frequently to give further teaching and encouragement, but not to direct the affairs of the church.
  - (5) That was more than 20 years ago, and today that church still meets. They now own their own building for worship and study, and they have their own Ukrainian leadership and are answerable to no higher power than Christ. They continue to preach the same gospel that Peter preached, and by so doing they lead others to follow Christ as well. They help one another when in need and help others outside the church, such as widows and orphans. By doing so, they are an embodiment of the church as it is described in the Bible.
  - (6) This same story has been repeated thousands of times in various places, and can be repeated anywhere when people desire to follow Jesus. It continues to be possible to follow Jesus without being a part of any humanly-devised organization.

#### **4. Why is the church important? Why can't believers in Christ simply exist as individual Christians, rather than as members of the church?**

- A. There are many believers in Christ who think of Christianity primarily in individualistic terms. That is, they focus only on their personal relationship to Christ and see no need to be part of a larger group of believers. For these people, the church is both unimportant and irrelevant.
- B. However, this understanding of living out one's Christian faith is a fairly recent development, and is not at all what is taught in the Bible. Rather, according to the Bible, to be a Christian is to be a member of Christ's church, and to be a member of the church is to be a Christian. No biblical

- writer ever conceives of lone believers who live out their faith in isolation from other believers.
- C. There are many reasons for this, but one of the primary ones is the individual believer's need for fellowship, teaching, and encouragement. Just as we saw in Acts 2, the primary activities of a church are meeting for worship and instruction and working together to do good for one another and for those outside the church. It is significant that from the very beginning, those who responded to the gospel of Christ were immediately formed into such a believing, worshiping, serving community. Later, in the New Testament book of Hebrews, the writer challenges believers not to give up their meetings for worship even the face of persecution. The more difficult it became to live as a Christian, the more they needed one another's encouragement to do so.
  - D. In the earliest writings of the New Testament, the thirteen letters of the apostle Paul, the churches in various Hellenistic cities are addressed with instructions about living as Christians, including how to encourage and even correct one another when necessary. Never does Paul imagine that any believer is capable of living out his or her faith in isolation from other believers.
  - E. It is for this reason that the Bible sometimes speaks of the church in terms of a *family*, people who are joined together by the fact that they all have God as their Father, and who relate to – and even speak of – one another as “brothers” and “sisters.” Just as every infant needs the nurture and protection of a family, so every new believer needs the nurture and protection of other believers, and that is what the church is to be and to do.
  - E. In addition to this very practical reason for the church, there is also the fact that Jesus stated His intention to establish what He called “my church,” and that He did so by giving up His own life for those who would believe and follow Him. Anything purchased at such a high price is not to be lightly disregarded.

##### **5. Why don't we see more models of this kind of church today? There are many reasons for this.**

- A. One reason is that Christians, although related to God in a new way through Jesus Christ, are still imperfect sinners and as such often fail to rise to the standard set in the Bible. But the fact that the church is (and always will be in this life) imperfect does not mean we should not strive to reach the ideals set forth in the Bible.
- B. Another reason is that our human traditions often obscure this vision of the church. In place of groups of believers in one location, we find institutions ruled by hierarchies of officials, people who are mostly unknown to those who follow their leadership. Substituting an institution for a living organism usually means the emphasis falls on the institution, not on the individual groups of believers.
- C. Perhaps one of the chief reasons why we don't see more churches today that are like the church we read about in the Bible is that being such a church places high demands on those who wish to be part of them. It is far easier to simply live out one's life according to one's own ideas and following one's own interests than to be responsible for others and to be responsive to their needs. A church that places no demands on its members other than their obligation to meet minimal standards of membership may be easier to achieve and maintain, but it is far from the ideal set forth in the Bible.

To many of you, this may seem like a new way of thinking about “church.” But in reality it is a very old way, in fact, the oldest way of all, because it goes all the way back to the beginning of the Christian faith. Before there were institutions or cathedrals or formal statements of doctrines, there were groups of believers in Christ, meeting together for worship and encouragement, seeking to fulfill the ideals taught by Jesus and the apostles in lives of simplicity, purity, and holiness. They were simply “the church,” and there are still many of them.

James T. South, Ph.D.  
tsouth@glenallenchurch.org